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Abstract

"These scientists have been dialoging for several years, demonstrating how two Christians with very different origin viewpoints can talk to each other peacefully, with respect."

Posting about the book *The Fool and the Heretic* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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October 24, 2019

Read it and Weep: A Review of *The Fool and the Heretic*

Carl Fictorie

Title: *The Fool and the Heretic: How Two Scientists Moved Beyond Labels to a Christian Dialogue About Creation and Evolution*

Authors: Todd Charles Wood and Darrel R. Falk

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Over the past few years, my faculty colleagues and I noticed that a group was forming in the community which promoted young-earth creationism (YEC), notably through the sponsorship of public events involving YEC speakers, but increasingly through criticisms of my colleagues on social media and the like.

As a response, my colleagues arranged for the Colossian Forum, an organization dedicated to helping Christians “transform cultural conflicts into opportunities for spiritual growth”¹ to bring Todd Wood and Darrell Falk to our campus. These scientists have been dialoging for several years, demonstrating how two Christians with very different origin viewpoints can talk to each other peacefully, with respect.

The Fool and the Heretic is the product of these discussions. It is essentially a print version of the public events that The Colossian Forum has arranged over the past several years. I was curious and motivated to see what these two have written, hoping

to see an example of a path to bring the two sides of the creation-evolution disagreement together.

The book is arranged as a dialogue. Wood and Falk write alternate chapters, each providing their point of view on an aspect of their relationship, their personal histories, and their views of the question of origins. Rob Barrett, who serves as the moderator of the public events, ties the chapters together with a preface and a prologue, an epilogue, and several interludes.² This book is meant to be a discussion starter, so there are discussion questions associated with most of the chapters and interludes and prompt the reader think about their own viewpoint, as well as to step into the shoes of a contrasting viewpoint.

Barrett's introduction gave some positive indications of a resolution between Falk and Wood: "We know deep in our bones that we—members of the body of Christ—belong together. It's inescapable." (12) The Christian church is supposed to strive for unity. Barrett goes on to acknowledge that disagreements have, and will continue to, happen. What matters is how we handle them:

"There has never been a time when Christ's church has been pure in the sense of not being pressed by important questions where people arrive at different answers. It's exactly in such pressured disagreements that our Christlikeness (or worldliness) is most clearly revealed. While these divisive issues are important, that importance shouldn't distract us from the importance of our obedience to Christ in the way we engage our disagreements. What if the way we handle ourselves is a test of our Christian character?" (15).

The purpose of the dialogue between Wood and Falk is to demonstrate how to disagree in love and how to make steps towards unity.

Over four pairs of chapters, Falk and Wood argue that the other person is both wrong and dangerous. They also share their personal histories, recount their first tense meetings together and how that developed into mutual respect and brotherly love, describe their particular understandings how to interpret scripture and the creation narrative, and describe their understanding of the science of origins. While they articulate their own positions and critique the other's, they are also quick to recognize each man's wisdom and orthodoxy. The crux of their disagreement centers on the interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. Wood reads it literally, while Falk reads it metaphorically. Both believe Genesis contains important and inspired truths about God, creation, and humankind.

If we stop here, one could conclude what Falk and Wood agree on much and disagree on relatively little. Wood does not believe Falk to be a heretic, nor does Falk believe Wood to be a fool. Both see each other as brothers in Christ. Both recount sensing the presence of the Holy Spirit during their discussions. Both understand the importance of unity among Christians. This dialogue is an encouraging step towards resolution and unity. It is too easy, as these men learned, to turn your opponent into a straw man. While it is much harder, it is also far more helpful and rewarding to discuss and debate in person. Barrett reminds us of Paul's admonition to patiently grow in love for one another and that perhaps for the lay Christian or young person "the thing that would encourage her most would be to see embodied love that rises above the ugly fighting that surrounds her every day" (186—187). Peaceful dialogue, centered around a mutual respect and love for the Creator, is a key step in bridging the gap between Christians in disagreement.

As the dialogue in the book progressed through these parallel chapters, I became more and more hopeful—anxiously reading the next paragraph, page, and chapter, seeking the light at the end of the tunnel, and the resolution that would bring these men together.

In the last of the interludes, Barrett retells a conversation he had with Wood and Falk after several years of public events:

"I once asked our two scientists if they saw each other as friends or enemies. I was confident, after all our time together, that they would agree that they were friends. Todd disappointed me when he answered, 'Not just enemies. Mortal enemies.' I looked pleadingly to gentle Darrel for the correction Todd needed. He failed me too: 'Yes, Todd's right'" (163-164).

Mortal enemies. I was crushed. Rather than finding them reconciled, or even just agreeing to disagree, Falk and Wood remain mortal enemies. Think about what that really means. Wood would like to see Falk dead rather than have his ideas out there and vice versa. That's a very harsh assessment, especially after describing each other as brothers in Christ. Unfortunately, it is characteristic of the post-reformation Christian church.

The reformers tried hard to reform the Catholic church before deciding that separation was the only remaining solution. That began a pattern of repeated schisms as groups of Christians, believing they had the right scriptural interpretation and that other groups were spouting heresy, walked away from each other, rather than staying at the table trying to work out their differences.³ In some cases, those schisms lead to persecution, and even war: mortal enemies.

Christians do themselves a disservice with all their infighting. Are not sin, Satan, and the powers and dominions of this world our mortal enemies? Satan must have cackled with glee when Wood and Falk described each other with that term. He must relish in the idea that encouraging Christians to fight amongst themselves is a wonderfully effective way to limit their ability to engage with culture and be a light unto the world.

I had hoped to see two things in this book. The first thing I was looking for was an articulation of what Falk and Wood agree upon, both scientifically and theologically. While both mention a variety of points in their respective chapters, what would be more helpful is if they could have jointly authored a single chapter that outlines these mutual understandings. A joint chapter not only outlines their agreement, it also suggests a beginning of a unified point of view.

The second thing I was looking for was some discussion of lessons learned by Wood, Falk, or Barrett on how Christians might disagree on some points, but join forces to engage with the real mortal enemy, Satan, and the forces of secular humanism that shape much of contemporary culture. While the book recognizes the importance of this, there is precious little wisdom here to help the rest of us along the way. Barrett expresses optimism that the progress Falk and Wood have made by engaging in their dialogue is a helpful start, but recognizes that it is still just a beginning (193-194).

I encourage Christian scientists, pastors, lay people, young people—really, all Christians—to read this book. Read it and weep. Read it and see how arguments like these divide the church, frustrate our young people, and hinder our witness to the world. Then, use that as an incentive to meet those brothers and sisters in Christ with whom you disagree, talk with them in peace and charity, find points of agreement, and get out and witness to the world as a unified body of Christ.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Colossian Forum, <https://colossianforum.org/about-us/mission-vision-our-story/>
2. In my opinion, Rob Barrett should also receive credit as a co-author given that he wrote about a quarter of the book.
3. I need to be clear and state that some schisms were clearly necessary. However, the pattern that developed was to take any issue that was causing division, find a way to ground it in a fundamental hermeneutical principle, and use that as the excuse to cry heresy and walk away from each other. Too many of these schisms occurred for too weak of reasons. While that may help with doctrinal purity, it has undermined Christian witness to the secular world.